



Winging into Wynyard

The author of this report has family ties to Wynyard. The report was provided to Mr Richard T Honess in October 2020, for publication by the Tasmanian Aviation Historical Society.

Introduction

Air transport opened new vistas to Tasmanians, providing the possibility of a speedy means of travel and faster mail delivery.

This article takes a chronological perspective of the building of an aerodrome in Wynyard, north west Tasmania, and the community spirit of Wynyard citizens in this project.

Primary sources of information are local Tasmanian newspapers, in particular, *The Advocate*, *The Examiner* and *The Mercury*. These media were widely respected by the Tasmanian community in the 20th century.

The 1900's

From 1900, when the Commonwealth of Australia began, residents in states began to see themselves as belonging to a new nation, Australia, rather than seeing England as 'home'. These early 1900 years were formative of Australian nationalism and were influenced considerably by press reports of aeronautical events in Europe.

The earliest recorded air flight to Tasmania¹ seems to be in 1914 when, a farmer from New South Wales, Andrew Delfosse Badgery, flew to Hobart and Launceston in a *biplane*. Having an eye to making profit, he charged a fee for joy rides at the Launceston and Hobart showgrounds. Later, he became a Lieutenant in No 1 Squadron Flying Corps and embarked on HMAT ship *Orsova* from Melbourne² to see service in Europe. Badgery's flight was an entrepreneurial incident, in that a man, who could fly an aircraft, grasped the opportunity to display his skills, and also to make a personal profit.

Just five years later, in 1919, Arthur Long flew a *Boulton-Paul* biplane from Melbourne to Hobart³ and then flew to north west Tasmania. He left Hobart with only a compass to map his direction, and, not surprisingly, became lost in cloud. Along the journey from Maria Island to Ross, in Tasmania's central midlands, he threw out bundles of *The Mercury* newspaper. This is said to be the first known air delivery of newspapers. At times during the flight, Long descended to 60 feet. Arthur Long continued from Launceston to make the first air flight to



northwest Tasmania, in just 3½ hours from Launceston to Stanley on 15th December 1919⁴. On 16th December he flew from Stanley to Port Melbourne, a journey taking 4 hours and 10 minutes, with an average speed of 112 kph and at an altitude of 500 metres⁵.

Arthur Long's flights through Tasmania were functional and service-oriented, introducing to Tasmanians the idea that air transport was a practical and efficient means of cargo movement and travel.

The 1920's

The 1920's were years of Australia's rehabilitation⁶ from World War 1, and a priority involved encouraging defence personnel in their return to civilian life. Many ex-defence personnel had roles as aviators and officials in early Australian aviation. Perhaps Australian aviation would not have developed as rapidly as it did without the efforts of ex-servicemen.

An early aviator visiting Tasmania was Captain Huxley. In May 1921, he flew from Launceston to King Island descending, at times, to 100 feet, and maintaining a ground speed of 105 mph. He described coastal towns as looking like 'clusters of pygmy houses'⁷. While flying over Burnie breakwater Huxley descended to 60 feet and at Table Cape, near Wynyard, flew at an altitude lower than the top of the headland.

Captain Huxley was enthusiastic about Short's Flying Boat NC4 design for aircraft flying the Bass Strait route because they were powered by 2 Rolls Royce Eagle 8 engines and had the ability to alight on a rough sea. Huxley saw two main uses of aeroplanes for Tasmania: compiling maps and locating valuable timbers in the island's inaccessible south west. Thus, Captain Huxley's support for the introduction of air transport to Tasmania had a commercial interest. In the 1920's, before recognition of the need to protect forest resources, unique Tasmanian timbers were marketable resources and maps would have revealed the location of Tasmania's unique pines.

On a community level, interest in flying grew, resulting in the establishment of the Tasmanian Aero Club in Launceston in 1927⁸. Flying competitions were publicised, such as the Commonwealth government offering £10,000 pounds to the 1st Australian to fly from London to Australia in 729 consecutive hours or 30 consecutive days in a British made machine. Two intertwined national alliances, the British 'mother' country with the requirement to use a British-manufactured plane, and the emerging ethos of Australian identity, can be seen here. Captain Ross Smith won the prize, flying a *Vickers Vimy* Rolls Royce powered aeroplane⁹.



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By 1928, aeroplane flying was seen as a hobby. Aeroplanes used to train pilots were moths, early aircraft which had folded wings. People from all walks of life were attracted. Just 8 hours of instruction with an instructor, followed by 2 hours of flying solo, could result in the award of a certificate to fly¹⁰. The cost of flying machines was relatively modest. For example, in January 1929, a new single seater flying machine, having a 25 foot wing-span and an *ABC Scorpion* engine, made at Brooklands aerodrome, cost approximately £300 pounds¹¹.

There were also local events stimulating flying interest. In Wynyard, one of these occasions occurred on 4th May 1928, when Captain Lancaster and Mrs Keith Miller landed on the Wynyard Golf Links¹², the town's first golf links and Wynyard's first aerodrome.

A motor boat and 2 rowing boats ferried people across the Inglis River to welcome the aviators in their plane, an *Aura Cirrus*, named *Red Rose*¹³. The plane was two hours late, having flown from Melbourne in a strong gale rain. It landed perfectly 200 yards down the golf course. Police reportedly had difficulty controlling the enthusiastic crowd. The fact that the *Red Rose* had safely flown from Melbourne to Wynyard in a strong gale was seen as an indication that an air service between Wynyard and the mainland could be established. Mrs Miller was the first woman to fly from England to Australia. For this feat she was acclaimed a celebrity, however she also suffered personally, with her husband divorcing her for desertion¹⁴.

Captain Lancaster ventured the opinion that the Wynyard Golf links would provide a safe landing place in any weather and Wynyard should certainly be considered as a landing and taking off place for aircraft¹⁵. Squadron Leader Bert Hinkler, also visited Wynyard in 1928¹⁶ and on 14th May 1928 after setting off from the Wynyard Golf Links aerodrome, he and his wife arrived at Coode Island aerodrome, Melbourne, at 12.50 pm, just 3 hours later¹⁷.

The visits of these aviators, together with their enthusiastic comments, encouraged the Wynyard community to believe that the Golf Links aerodrome was an excellent landing place for aeroplanes¹⁸ and increased their efforts to improve it.

In October 1928, the *Vaudevillians Comedy Co-op* was formed in Wynyard by a group of local musicians. They aimed to present musical entertainment at the *Princess Theatre*, Wynyard, to raise funds for local community projects, particularly the Golf Links aerodrome¹⁹. These same people, who entertained, together with others, provided suppers after the shows. And, of course, the audience who paid to attend the performances provided the much-needed money to purchase items such as grass seed, gravel and drainage for the Golf Links aerodrome site. Thus, raising money through musical entertainment was one of the creative ways that Wynyard people contributed to the establishment of the Golf Links aerodrome site.



What the locals who heard aviators such as Lancaster, Hinkler, Miller and Huxley say the Golf Links aerodrome was an excellent landing place for aeroplanes²⁰ may have overlooked, was that these aviators made their comments as polite visitors. It is not surprising, that the visiting aviators declared the Golf Course site to be 'a natural aerodrome'²¹ while being entertained to afternoon tea by Golf Club members.

The reality was that the Golf Links aerodrome site probably was 'a natural aerodrome' for small planes flown by Hinkler, Lancaster and Huxley. But aircraft designers were continually creating larger aircraft for an increasingly demanding and commercially-oriented market. Future aircraft, being larger, would need longer and wider landing and take off sites. Hidden below the 1920's froth and bubble excitement, smouldered the unthinkable doubt: would the Golf Links site have sufficient physical capacity to accommodate larger aircraft?

The 1930's

The 1930's began with Australia becoming aware of the world depression. As the impact of the Wall Street crash became reality, Australia's nightmare of unemployment and poverty began. From 1930 to 1935, Australia's serious economic depression arguably caused Tasmania, with its small population, and limited resources, more suffering than other Australian states²². Money and employment were scarce.

On 27th December 1930 Air Commander Kingsford Smith and his wife attended Latrobe sports day²³ while on honeymoon. This was organised by Australian Prime Minister, Mr J. A. Lyons²⁴. They secretly visited Wynyard, lunching at the *Commercial Hotel*, as guests of Mr Brown, the publican. There was subsequently disappointment from Wynyard locals who would have used the visit to promote the Golf Links site for an aerodrome.

The potential for financial progress attaching to the creation of an aerodrome was recognised by local councils²⁵. Wynyard had a natural attribute of flat land and Hinkler had commented on its suitability for night landings due to the availability of a direct line for bearings from the Table Cape lighthouse²⁶. For day flying, Table Cape, together with the River Inglis and Bass Strait, formed conspicuous boundaries from the point of view of visibility²⁷, visual navigation being predominant for flying in 1931.

In January 1931, Mr Sheehan, the manager of Vacuum Oil Company, accompanied by 2 airmen, Officers Butler and Hannan, visited Wynyard. They inspected the Golf Course site and considered it too small for an aerodrome. They were then taken to a tract of vacant land on the outskirts of the town which was currently being used as a Race Course. They concluded that the Race Course site was excellent²⁸ for development as an aerodrome. Thus, at this early



stage in 1931, there was recognition that air transportation would escalate and it was also anticipated that the size of aeroplanes would increase. A further inspection in June 1931 by Captain Huxley and Flying Officer Owen supported the Race Course site for aerodrome development²⁹.

Thus, the decision was taken to abandon the Golf Links aerodrome site and concentrate on developing the larger Race Course site. However, funds were required.

Consequently, in November 1931 the Vaudevillians Comedy Co-op banded together under a new name, the Co-Optimist's Comedy Company. Their aim was to provide entertainment which could engender funds for the development of the Race Course aerodrome site³⁰. The name, Co-Optimist's Comedy Company, was adopted from the Co-Optimists Stage Variety Review Club which began in London in June 1921³¹. Musicians in the Co-Optimist's Comedy Company of 1931 included an accomplished pianist, Mrs Alice Scetrine, who wrote much of the original musical and choreographic material, as well as conducting an orchestra from the piano. Her husband, Mr Bert Scetrine, Wynyard Post-Master up to 1938, played saxophone, and son Bert junior, played percussion. Violinists included Burnie dentist, Mr Walter Lucadou-Wells, and Wynyard music teacher Mr Lloyd Porter. Chorus members were recruited and taught the dance routines and songs. Vocal soloists in the chorus included Mrs Margaret Touzeau, newsagent and bookseller. Mr Bill Touzeau, a talented artist and photographer, made elaborate stage sets.

Costumes were made by a team including local council administrative officer, Ms Eileen Graham, and Ms Beenie Dixon. Ms Florence Madge Hays, local hairdresser, led the make-up team and hair styles. These talented people again gave of their time and expertise to raise funds for the establishment of the Wynyard aerodrome, this time, at the Racecourse site.

At the conclusion of the concert in the *Princess Theatre* in November 1931, the public were informed that drains on the Race Course site would be completed within a week and the expectation was that the aerodrome would be licensed in a fortnight³².

But this was not to be. When Mr Augenson of the Commonwealth Department of Civil Aviation inspected the Race Course site in December 1931³³ he informed that further surface work was required before a licence could be granted³⁴. He believed that when the surface levelling was complete and the site expanded, it would be suitable for training and light aircraft³⁵.

Nevertheless, apparently a provisional licence was granted because the first Wynyard air pageant was held in February 1932³⁶.



In February 1933 the second air pageant was held on the incomplete Race Course aerodrome, with the area saturated with water in the morning to reduce dust³⁷. Highlights of the 1933 pageant included Captain Francis giving a flying exhibition, landing from 2,000 feet with a stalled engine, and sharp shooting of balloons from aero club moths³⁸.

Interest in flying as a hobby continued to grow, with increasing numbers of women taking to the air. In February 1933 Captain Francis commented that four women had competed in the latest flying competition and in his opinion showed greater natural aptitude than men³⁹. A successful competitor in this competition was Ms Florence Madge Hays, Wynyard's first ladies hairdresser.

The preparation of the Race Course site off Tofft's estate⁴⁰, was beyond the capacity of volunteers. It required substantial vegetation removal, drainage and levelling. Tenders were called but they were too high so it was decided to raise funds and pay local, unemployed local married men to do the work. As most married men in Wynyard were employed, unemployed single men were given the aerodrome work⁴¹. The supervisor allotted work and men were paid when the supervisor was satisfied⁴².

In June 1933 it was reported that 'exceptional progress' was being made with the clearing of the Race Course site⁴³. However, additional funds were required so in September 1933 a public meeting was held in the Committee Room of Wynyard's *Princess Theatre* to discuss ways of raising funds to complete the aerodrome works⁴⁴. The expectation was that the aerodrome would be revenue-producing⁴⁵ and this would entice the community to provide the £150/0/0 for the required work. Clearly, the development of Wynyard aerodrome was a community venture.

It is remarkable that in the midst of Australia's serious economic depression of the 1930's there was a call for funds to develop a second aerodrome. The first Wynyard aerodrome on the Golf Links site had been developed through the hard work of many community-minded Wynyard people, just 5 years previously. Yet in September 1933, came a further call for funding to establish a new aerodrome on a different site. Again the Wynyard people responded, with money and their labour. So 'Wynyard people power' created the Race Course aerodrome, in the same way that the Golf Course aerodrome was developed.

The resilience and community spirit of Wynyard people was acknowledged by Sir George Peirce, the Minister for Defence, when he visited the town in February 1934. He said the civic spirit of the people of Wynyard in developing the aerodrome, was 'an example to others'⁴⁶.



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Despite further drainage, surface levelling and clearing to the creek being required⁴⁷ in January 1934, a provisional licence was granted⁴⁸.

The Prime Minister of Australia, Mr Joe Lyons opened the Race Course aerodrome on 26th February 1934 and the 3rd air pageant was held on 27th February 1934⁴⁹. Amazingly, two other air pageants had been held, the first in February 1932, the second in February 1933⁵⁰ presumably with the Wynyard aerodrome holding just a provisional licence.

In 1938, Mr W. Touzeau, looking back, pointed out that Wynyard's first aerodrome on the Golf Links⁵¹ was a venture which did much to develop the town's community spirit. The hard work of a dedicated group of people in establishing the Golf Links aerodrome set the scene for the development of the aerodrome at the Race Course site⁵² now known as Burnie Wynyard aerodrome.



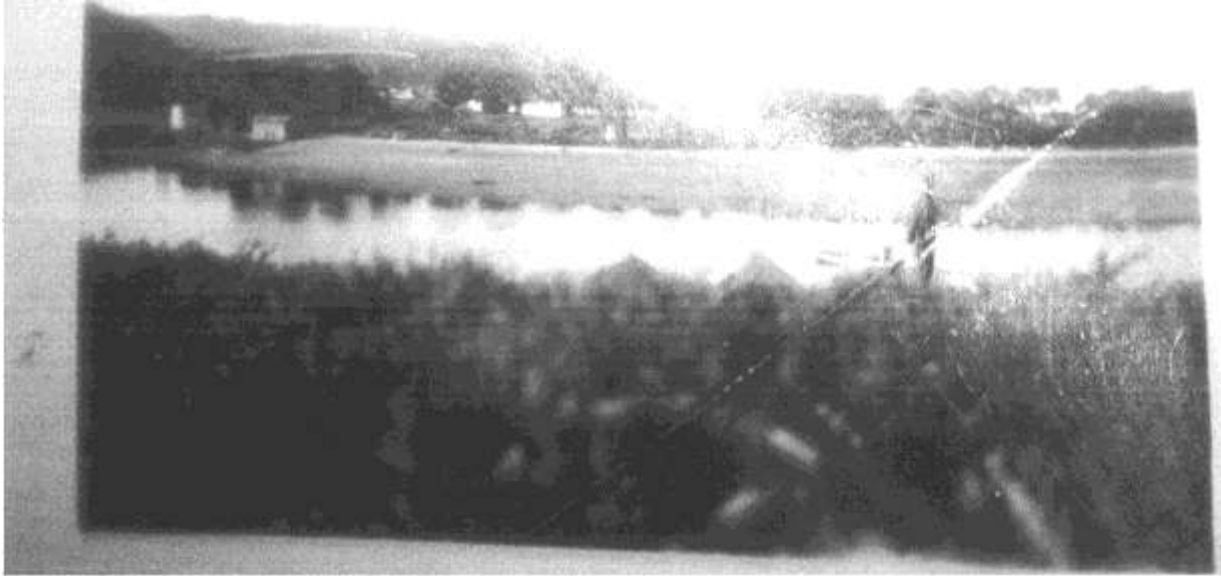
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Ms F. M. Hays with Captain Vic Holyman, Wynyard aerodrome, c1934



Ms F. M. Hays in aeroplane, Wynyard aerodrome, c1933, possibly with Captain Francis



Looking across the Inglis River to the Golf Links aerodrome c1929



Looking across the Inglis River to the Golf Club aerodrome, c1931



Mrs Alice Scetrine and Mr Bert Scetrine, Wynyard, c1930

¹ Julian Burgess (2015) *The Local History Site*, Tasmania

² World War 1, *Embarkation Roll*, Australian War Memorial

³ Wendy Rimon (2000) *Companion to Tasmanian History*, Centre for Tasmanian Historical Studies

⁴ Pirrie Shiel (2019) *Bridging the Strait*, ABC Tasmania

⁵ Pirrie Shiel (2019) *Bridging the Strait*, ABC Tasmania

⁶ Gordon Greenwood (1955) *Australia: A Social and Political History*, Angus & Robertson, p287

⁷ *The Examiner*, 16 May 1921, p5

⁸ Wendy Rimon (2000) *Companion to Tasmanian History*, Centre for Tasmanian Historical Studies

⁹ *The Advocate*, 28 March 1928, p6

¹⁰ *The Advocate*, 28 March 1928, p6

¹¹ *The Advocate*, 4 January 1929, p2

¹² *The Advocate*, 5 May 1928, p4

¹³ *The Advocate*, 5 May 1928, p4

¹⁴ *The Examiner*, 13 November 1931, p6

¹⁵ *The Advocate*, 5 May 1928 p4

¹⁶ *The Advocate*, 15 May 1928 p4

¹⁷ *The Advocate*, 15 May 1928, p4

¹⁸ *The Advocate*, 29 May 1928 p2



- ¹⁹ *The Advocate*, 13 October 1928, p4
²⁰ *The Advocate*, 29 May 1928 p2
²¹ *The Advocate*, 29 May 1928 p2
²² Matthew Cloudsdale (1975) *Tasmania and Unemployment 1930-1933*, Honours Thesis, University of Tasmania
²³ *The Advocate*, 29 December 1930 p4
²⁴ *The Advocate*, 29 December 1930 p4
²⁵ *The Advocate*, 14 January 1931 p4
²⁶ *The Advocate*, 14 January 1931, p4
²⁷ *The Advocate*, 14 January 1931, p4
²⁸ *The Advocate*, 14 January 1931, p4
²⁹ *The Examiner*, 20 June 1931, p7
³⁰ *The Advocate*, 11 November 1931, p6
³¹ *Wikipedia*, accessed 4 October 2020
³² *The Advocate*, 14 November 1931, p6
³³ *The Examiner*, 12 December 1931, p5
³⁴ *The Examiner*, 12 December 1931, p5
³⁵ *The Examiner*, 12 December 1931, p5
³⁶ *The Advocate*, 17 February 1933, p9
³⁷ *The Advocate*, 16 February 1933, p5
³⁸ *The Advocate*, 17 February 1933, p9
³⁹ *The Advocate*, 17 February 1933, p 9
⁴⁰ *The Advocate*, 26 May 1933, p6
⁴¹ *The Advocate*, 8 June 1933 p6
⁴² *The Advocate*, 8 June 1933 p6
⁴³ *The Advocate*, 8 June 1933 p6
⁴⁴ *The Advocate*, 27 September 1933, p6
⁴⁵ *The Advocate*, 27 September 1933 p6
⁴⁶ *The Advocate*, 5 February 1934, p2
⁴⁷ *The Advocate*, 25 July 1934, p6
⁴⁸ *The Advocate*, 21 February 1934 p6
⁴⁹ *The Advocate*, 27 February 1934
⁵⁰ *The Advocate*, 17 February 1933, p9
⁵¹ *The Advocate*, 15 December 1938, p4
⁵² *The Advocate*, 17 December 1938, p4